

The Challenges of Implementing an Online Telecollaboration Project

オンラインによるテレコラボレーションプロジェクトの 実践と課題

by

Christopher TEMPEST*

Abstract

Whilst advances in the Internet and technology have contributed greatly to language learning in recent years, exposure to opportunities for language use within an online educational environment are less prevalent. Utilising the learning platform Moodle, this small-scale project had a primary focus of facilitating communication and exchange between students of a university in Japan and a university in the U.K. The participants consisted of 33 students, 20 from Japan and 13 from the U.K. The project attempted to oversee online interactions between the two groups via activities on the Moodle platform, to encourage participation within this online community and build connections. However, due to problems on both sides of the project, the desired outcomes were not realised. These included activity preparation challenges, student and teacher engagement, time management and scheduling, and teacher-to-teacher communication. This article highlights the challenges in this project and outlines future adaptations to prevent the same mistakes again. It also aims to present to the audience the potential pitfalls of undertaking similar projects.

Key Words : telecollaboration, Moodle, online exchange

1. Introduction

Even though English is taught in the public education system, opportunities for exposure and meaningful use are scarce. To address this, a small-scale online telecollaboration project was established between a university in Japan and England. The aim of this project was to encourage students to make international connections and develop language

skills, all within a controlled online educational environment. However, these desired goals were not fully realised and the project was considered unsuccessful due to lack of participation. This article will outline how the project was set-up, followed by possible reasons why it did not yield desired results. It also presents solutions of these issues examined for possible future iterations.

2. Past Research

Previous research has shown several examples of

* Senior Assistant Professor, Sojo International Learning Center

online intercultural telecollaboration used in classrooms (Belz, 2007; Dooly, 2008; Hagley, 2016; O'Dowd, 2014).

These have shown positive developments, including:

- increase of intercultural awareness
- exposure to authentic language
- target language development
- collaboration

Whilst there are some drawbacks in implementing and managing online telecollaboration projects stemming from such issues as cultural differences (Basharina, 2009; O'Dowd & Ritter, 2006) and technological understanding (Hagley and Harashima, 2017), there is a lot to be gained from online intercultural and language exchanges for those involved. With the rapid growth of internet use in education over the past two decades and more accessible technology in educational environments, especially higher education, online telecollaboration can be utilised to enhance and enrich learners' understanding of their target language and deepen their knowledge of other cultures through communication with individuals in those locations.

Large-scale projects such as that of Hagley (2016), which connects Japanese students from many institutions in Japan to other countries, have shown success. With involved parties using English as a medium, they interact with each other through forum posts on the Moodle platform. The project brings collaborations between not just students of different cultures and languages but also between teachers. Such a project can show, whilst challenging to initially set-up and manage, popularity with both teachers and students. A smaller version of a similar project, it was hoped, would show similar results.

3. Context and Rationale

Sojo University has a particular focus on scientific majors such as pharmacy, aero-space systems engineering and computer information

sciences with no English major courses. However, the university realises the importance of English and requires students to complete a two-year compulsory English communication course as part of their degree. In addition to this the university also promotes other English projects, such as social events, speech contests and study abroad programs. The university is eager for students to experience interactions with other cultures, either through study abroad projects or through government-organised international projects. The university is also eager to make international connections outside of Japan. As such, another purpose of this project was to give students the opportunity to make those connections whilst improving their language skills and deepening their cultural knowledge.

In addition to this, Japanese students in general have limited exposure to authentic English in their home country. By introducing an online telecollaboration project, it was hoped they would have an opportunity to use the English they are studying in meaningful ways. This situation is reflective of my own experience of learning Japanese in England. Through correspondences via e-mail with Japanese students, I was able to use my language skills in ways that I would not have been able to do so otherwise. This is something that I wanted Sojo students to have a chance to experience.

4. Project Set-up

Moodle was used for this project as it was familiar to Sojo students and it could be easily accessible for others. It also has been used in similar projects previously (Hagley, 2016; Harashima et al, 2015) and thus seemed a suitable choice. Moodle also provided an environment where student activities could be supervised, managed and guided by the teacher, something that other platforms such as e-mail and social media sites could not provide easily.

The project wanted to facilitate and encourage interaction between students learning Japanese in England and Sojo students studying English in

Japan. The main expectations were for students to use their native and target languages to communicate with their counterparts, complete a variety of activities and tasks and to engage in free communication outside of set tasks. This had the expectation that students would not only practice their own target language and receive feedback from other students but also to be exposed to language use by individuals from the other university. The activities were designed to have students interact or work together to complete tasks in a fun and engaging way and the free communication, it was hoped, would help students build rapport with each other and allow them to discuss topics and cultural aspects that they are interested in.

The project consisted of 20 first-year Japanese students at Sojo taking a compulsory English communication course. The international students were based in a university in England where they were studying Japanese language as part of their studies and consisted of 13 second-year students. The project originally started in May 2016 and was completed by January 2017.

Initially there were only two activities available: an online introduction activity where students would upload pictures and write about themselves, and a forum where students could talk about any topic. Also on the site were links to various sites to give students information about each other's universities and cities. For the self-introduction activity students would upload 6 photos about themselves, such as favourite food, hometown, and hobbies. They would then accompany these pictures with a written outline introducing each of the pictures and talk about themselves. Sojo students would write in English and the U.K students would write in Japanese. Upon completion students would then be able to read and comment on different introductions in either English or Japanese. Sojo students were given time in-class to do the task and were asked to complete it as homework should they not finish.

In addition to the above activity, students had the opportunity to post and reply to topics of their

choice or ones suggested by the teacher, for example, music interests. Students could use Japanese or English in this forum and were encouraged to introduce music and artists from their own countries and to explore music from their counterparts' country with the intention of intercultural learning.

5. Course Evaluation

Of the 33 participants, 10 completed the self-introduction activity, 8 from Sojo and 2 from the U.K. The self-introduction activity was deemed complete once students had uploaded all the required pictures and accompanying text. The activity was partially completed by 9 Sojo students and the remaining 14 students failed to complete the activity. They had not accessed the course. If tasks had missing pictures or incomplete text they were considered to be incomplete. Finally, there were no posts made to the free talk forum by any student.

Whilst this was my first iteration of such a project in this context, O'Dowd & Ritter (2006) capture the essence of this project: "Educators interested in organizing telecollaborative projects should therefore have an in-depth understanding of the possible reasons for failed communication" (p 639). Due to the lack of interaction and participation of students during this project, possible issues will now be addressed as to why the goals outlined earlier did not come to fruition. This will be divided into three sub-sections: participation, activities, and timing.

5.1 Participation

Class participation was one of the major drawbacks of the project with many different challenges. Primarily, students volunteered to participate in the project from both universities. Whilst the project gave students an opportunity to communicate with others from different cultures, there was no academic incentive to complete the project. Of the 32 students in the Sojo class, a third did not want to take part at all, leading to a decrease

in the number of students participating. This also resulted in class time allocation becoming more difficult as not every student would be participating. This lack of class time forced the activities to be completed in the students' free time. This, combined with no grade contribution to their English course at Sojo, may have caused students to deem it not important to complete or attempt.

5.2 Activities

The activities themselves were directly affected by this lack of participation. The main activity itself was intended to be done on a computer, rather than a mobile device and could take some time to complete, especially for first time users. As such, having students complete the tasks outside of class can be a hindrance if students do not have easy access to computers at university or at home. This could have led to the inconsistent completions and lack of comments on tasks. This in turn could lead to less incentive for students to complete tasks if they see that others have not completed them. One other factor could be that the overall goal was not explicitly set. Whilst students were told how to complete the task, the desired outcome of intercultural interaction was perhaps not made clear enough by both teachers at the universities and thus may have had a negative impact on the task.

5.3 Timing

The last area of difficulty was that of timing. As mentioned earlier, allocation of class time proved difficult, not just for students but also for teachers. Dedicating class time to something that is not contributing to students' grades can be acceptable in small amounts. However, teachers needed to focus more on their original curriculum and cover the necessary content of the course.

Semester scheduling and course progressions at both the institutes posed a problem. Due to the academic calendars of the two locations being different, (Japan's academic calendar starts in April whilst the U.K starts in September), the project had

to be delayed to allow for students to prepare for exams, absences due to vacation time and students just starting the academic year. Finding a time in the semester that was suitable for both universities proved difficult.

Lastly, because this was an entirely voluntary project, the teachers did not want to put unnecessary pressure on students regarding time to complete tasks, as it was initially thought that this would not encourage students to complete the tasks if they had a deadline. As such, they were asked to finish the tasks when they could and were reminded to do so often. However, this resulted in students often forgetting about the tasks or losing interest due to the lack of engagement with the activity.

6. Solutions

Solutions to some of the problems could be fixed easily, whilst others may be more challenging. One of the simpler solutions would be to outline the course schedule for both classes, in Japan and the U.K, in advance with teachers deciding an appropriate time to initiate and close the project. Whilst at the beginning of the academic year, such detailed schedules may not be available, a general timeline of when vacations are and exam periods might enable collaboration.

Giving students concise goals and having students finish the tasks to a satisfactory standard in a timely fashion is another solution that could be implemented. Explicitly telling students why they are doing the tasks and describing what the desired outcomes are may enable students to approach tasks more effectively. In addition to this, setting a deadline for tasks, not necessarily strictly, but by overseeing students' progress and reminding them about their progress, may encourage them to complete the tasks more thoroughly.

Slightly more challenging concerns may arise from task appropriateness and participation. By simplifying the tasks so that they can be easily accessible on mobile devices and easy to interact

with may allow students more time to actually complete and engage in them. However, this is all dependent on what technology is available to students, which may differ among students, classes and locations, making it more difficult to manage and plan for.

Finally, by giving some grade contribution for such a project would justify not just all students participating in the project but would also allow for class time to be allocated to the completion of tasks. This may enable the teacher to check students' contributions and interactions and give assistance immediately. Whilst this could be considered the most difficult aspect to implement considering the different curricular and time schedules that both classes have, doing so, even in small grade contributions, may motivate students and support desired outcomes outlined previously.

7. Conclusion

With the available technology and opportunities at both institutions to promote and engage in telecollaboration activities and language development, many issues that occurred could have been avoided with more effective planning. This especially regards set-up and execution of the project. What started as an intervention to motivate language study and intercultural awareness among students in their respective target languages eventually became an ineffective project. For future iterations of this project, things would be approached differently. I still believe that such projects can provide effective learning opportunities for students. The problems that occurred in this instance can be avoided in future iterations of similar projects.

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